

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
December 4, 2022

Playing Second Fiddle

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament lesson this morning is one of the classic announcements of a future king in the line of David, one who will inaugurate a reign of peace with justice, especially for the poor. We hear proclaimed a coming time of peace, and a time of tranquility in the natural order. Finally, we are told that all nations will unite around this descendant of David. Listen to Isaiah 11:1-10 . . .

Introduction to Gospel Lesson

On the Second Sunday of Advent, the Gospel reading each year deals with the person and work of John the Baptist—the one who came to prepare the way for the Advent of Christ in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. He would do so boldly, but also fully accepting his lesser role in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation. Listen to Matthew 3:1-12 . . .

Sermon

The Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 2 for the First Sunday of Advent would have taken us with Isaiah to the mountain of the Lord’s house—the temple at Jerusalem. Today we visit a stump or tree base, from which a branch will grow. The trunk and roots are named Jesse, but our attention is directed to the stem or branch that represents new growth.

Now Jesse is the name of David’s father (1 Samuel 16:1), so we see that this growing tree is the house of David. It’s really a family tree, and our passage today from Isaiah 11 is the source of the popular devotional and worship device of a Jesse Tree, used in many churches as an Advent calendar. Isaiah speaks of a new branch, and subsequent verses declare this hoped for stem from the house of Jesse/David. A new Davidic king will emerge from this stump.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
 and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
 the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 the spirit of counsel and might,
 the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (11:1-2)

This coming king will establish a peaceable kingdom where all will be well. Justice and righteousness will prevail. Peace on earth and good will toward men. Tranquility in nature.

They will not hurt or destroy
 on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
 as the waters cover the sea. (v. 9)

Of course, the gospel writers saw the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the person of Jesus Christ, sent in the fullness of time, a king, but a different kind of king than many were looking for. And John the Baptist steps forth to prepare the way.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 'Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.'" (Mt. 3:1-3)

It's no secret that humility is a rare commodity in our world today. You hardly ever hear a CEO say, "Well, our success this year was not all because of me. There was someone who came before me who really prepared the way." They often portray themselves as masters of the turnaround, as if nothing good happened until they got there to reverse the general incompetence of the organization. We even hear such leaders described as "saviors." Oftentimes, presidents like to take credit for every positive economic or employment report, every international achievement, but blame someone else for everything that goes wrong.

When I go out to get the paper in the morning, and see the stars of the heavens, I am reminded of how great our God is—to have created all that. But the stars can also

remind us of how we are just a tiny spark in a vast universe. Sometimes it's good to keep that sense of smallness, as long as we remember that no matter how small we are in the universe, we are never insignificant to God.

Maybe sometimes you feel that you don't matter. They don't do interviews with folks like you and me; you never see our names in the headlines (which may not be a bad thing). Our small acts of service for the Lord don't attract much attention. In one sense, feeling small is OK. It can keep us from becoming arrogant and full of pride. But in another sense, we have to be careful, because even though nobody but the Lord is indispensable, none of us are so small that we are unimportant. There is a big difference between being humble and feeling inferior or useless.

Happily, when it comes to the real Savior, Jesus Christ, modesty is seen, not only in him, but also in the one who heralded his coming. From the beginning John embraces his role as the predecessor, the preparer, the prophet, pointing the way to Jesus, not trying to garner acclaim for himself.

More than two hundred years ago there was another man named John, a preacher of extraordinary power and influence in England and America. John Wesley was the founder of the Methodists. Surprisingly however, Wesley was not the most popular preacher of his day. That was George Whitefield who preached to far more people than Wesley, baptized many more into the church, and was a favorite of such prominent Americans as Benjamin Franklin.

Well, Whitefield and Wesley were the best of friends until they had a severe falling out over Whitefield's strict adherence to Calvinist doctrine. Following this breach, Whitefield was asked, "Do you expect that you will see John Wesley in heaven?"

"No," answered Whitefield.

"That's what I thought you'd say," his questioner replied.

“But you don’t know what I mean,” said Whitefield. “Wesley will be so far up there near the great Throne, I will never see him.”

Such an answer takes a certain kind of divine humility. John the Baptist had that kind of humility. Thus, in spite of his own popularity, it was not his intent to draw attention to himself. Content to play his part, John’s greatest desire was to glorify Jesus.

Leonard Bernstein once said that the hardest instrument to play is second fiddle. To “play second fiddle” is to take a subordinate position to another person. The phrase derives from the role of second fiddle in an orchestra. Those who play second fiddle play a supporting role musically to the first violinists, who usually play the melody. John willingly took the part of second fiddle, and played it well.

From Shakespeare’s play, *As You Like It*, we read:

“All the world’s a stage,
and all the men and women merely players.” (Act II, Scene 7)

Yet, those who appear on the center stage of the world are usually not considered “mere players.” The public often holds them up to be the great ones. Like Beethoven or Mozart. George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. John Wayne or Audrey Hepburn. Michael Jordan or Tom Brady. Those who appear at center stage are usually outstanding in one way or another.

Remember the story of God’s choice of king that we read about in 1 Samuel (16). Samuel was ready to anoint the tall and handsome Eliab, or Abinadab, or Shammah, or any of the seven oldest sons of Jesse! But God’s choice is not there!

God’s choice turns up missing at the climatic moment and must be brought in from off-stage, from out of the Judean wilderness where he was keeping sheep. Almost as an afterthought, Jesse identifies an eighth son, a boy, a shepherd, a nobody. “Send and bring him,” says Samuel. “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one,” says the Lord. And in a private

ceremony, the meaning of which may not have been understood by the brothers, or even himself, David is thrust onto the center stage of the history of God's people.

And it was among off-stage people like shepherds that Jesus was born. It is this same carpenter of Nazareth whom God placed on the center stage of life, when people were looking for someone different—a Messiah with military might. It is this Jesus, in humble obedience and sacrifice, who was crucified on a cross for us and our salvation, who changed the entire course of human history.

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. (Mark 12:10b)

The apostle Paul reminded the early Christians of Corinth that they, also the insignificant ones of society, had been brought by God into the main act of his salvation story. In 1 Corinthians 1 we read:

Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. (vv. 26-27)

My friends, every Christian has a task to do and a part to play—not a mere part, but a significant part. You say you can't lead worship? But what if it were just the minister, the pianist, and the choir on Sunday morning?

Think of things you *can* do: send a card, make a visit, call someone on the phone, offer an encouraging word, make needed repairs on the church, deliver meals. Maybe you can't serve as a minister, an elder, or a Sunday School teacher. But you can pray for those who do and for others who need our prayers. Maybe you can't give but just a little...think of the widow's mite.

Jesus said:

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.” (Mark 12:43b)

There was a young woman who always wanted to be a doctor. But because of family and finances, she couldn't. So she went to a community college and became a nurse. And then in the hospital she served God by providing care to patients, men and women who were sick, or recovering from surgery. Not dwelling on what she couldn't do, she played her part. And thereby she became an instrument of God's loving and caring hand.

Today we install four members to the Office of Elder. But most of us are not currently serving on the Session. The important thing is that all of us bloom where we're planted, making the most of our time. That we seek to live as children of light. That we offer our God-given time, our God-given talents, our God-given gifts, our very selves to God today, here and now—knowing that God has a part for each of us to play. And that no part is unimportant in God's sight.

From the stump of a tree would come one to inaugurate a peaceable kingdom. His way was prepared by John the Baptist, who was willing to play his part.

We too have a part to play in the building of God's kingdom. It may seem small and insignificant, but it's surely not.

“For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (1 Sam. 16:7b)

Thanks be to God! Amen.